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CONCERNING CATHOLIC HISTORICAL SOCIETIES

The late Edward Freeman did but a poor service to his profession when he gave utterance to the dictum that "history is past politics." It is true that he but formulated the belief, as evidenced by their works, of many of his predecessors and contemporaries, and even today far too many teachers and writers of history hold to the narrow view set forth by the distinguished regius professor. Fortunately, however, not only for the historical profession but for all those who, unconsciously or otherwise, are served by history, it is now generally recognized that history is far more than past politics. Someone has happily described it as the "memory of society," a description which, barring certain difficulties in the comparison, is, perhaps, more apt than any other. The human being who has lost his memory is indeed in a pitiable plight. Just as memory of past experience is the most constant single factor in determining individual conduct, so the social memory is the most constant single factor in determining public opinion, which itself is the mainspring of social activity.

Furthermore, as the individual memory may be mistaken and the individual forced to correct it by reference to diary, letters, or memoranda, so may the social memory be at fault, and recourse must be had to documentary and other materials in order that society may, in the determination of its conduct, be guided by a correct understanding of its past experience.

The function of the historian thus is to jog the social memory, to study the experience of society in the past and to set forth his findings for the service of the present.

Let it not be assumed that I am advancing the theory—which I believe to be fallacious—that the study of the past enables us to foretell the future. The individual cannot prophesy as to his future on the basis of his memory and no more can society forecast what is to come by reference to its history. But what I do maintain is that, just as the individual cannot hope to conduct himself with wisdom and prudence unless he possesses a correct knowledge and understanding of his experience, so society cannot expect to meet wisely new situations as they arise without a true knowledge and understanding of its history.

The newspaper of the present day is sometimes regarded as the antithesis of all that is historical, and yet I venture to say that no institution, if the newspaper may be called an institution, is more dependent upon history, or has more frequent recourse to it. No account of an accident, or of a catastrophe, or of an international crisis but is set off with a wealth of historical and biographical details. The newspaper furnishes us with the most convincing demonstration of the truth that the events of the present are meaningless unless they be viewed in the light of the past.

It has been customary in some circles to regard the historical profession as devoted to a harmless, though amiable pursuit, but one of little if any "practical" use, and to look upon the student of history as a person who, having too few red corpuscles in his blood, is content to bury his head in the dust of the past, oblivious to the interests and exigencies of the present.

That such a view has prevailed is doubtless the fault, to a certain extent, of members of the historical profession themselves. Still more, however, is it due to the fact that the general public fails to realize to what a degree it depends upon history at every turn. Just as the Bourgeois Gentilhomme had been speaking prose all his life without knowing it, so society has, throughout its existence, had daily and hourly recourse to its history without realizing it.

It has been a weakness of the historical profession that, often engrossed in matters of method and of minute detail, it has too little recognized its obligations to the world in which it lives. It has overemphasized now one phase, now another, of its subject matter. Political history—the history of governments in their dealings with each other and with their peoples—preoccupied the historian until the latter part of the last century. Then we heard much about the "economic side" of history, which was thought to be the determining factor in the course of human events; then came the "geographical factor" demanding due consideration, and we were asked to believe that the accidents of the earth's surface were the predominating causal elements; "social" factors came along in turn and the science of sociology spread abroad over the land, bringing in its train the ethnic, cultural, and religious "factors." To the outsider, the historical profession seemed to be a house divided and subdivided against

itself; and the Philistines gleefully predicted its speedy collapse.

Out of the seeming chaos, however, has developed the modern idea of history—namely, that its function is to present truthfully, and in their proper inter-relations, all phases of the past for the consideration of the present. But no one historian undertakes to do this any more than any single member of the medical profession undertakes to pose as a master of all branches of medical and surgical science. Every profession is and must be composed of specialists, and the historical profession is no exception to the rule.

The functions of the specialists vary. There are the hewers of wood and the drawers of water; there are those who assemble and make accessible the materials which are to serve as the basis of all historical investigation; there are others who study in minutest detail one small phase or period or area of historical activity; there are others still who coordinate the work of others and produce histories of more general range, and there are also those who interpret, but these are called philosophers.

Certain it is that the work of the first of these groups is fundamental to the work of all the others; also it is a work in which all may have a part. Indeed the very nature of the case demands that as many as possible should have a part in it, for history is the account of all phases of human, or, if you please, social activity, which is the same thing, and it is based upon the records of that activity. Now everyone contributes, in one way or another, to the creation of those records, and everyone may and should contribute to their accumulation, to their collection and to making them accessible.

Much confusion is due to the connotation of the word "record." We are apt to think of it as something formal, something official, as appertaining to government or to organized institutions. In its broader sense, however, the word is used by the historian to describe anything that gives him a clue to the facts which he is seeking to determine. The notes and other communications exchanged between the belligerent governments at the outbreak of the present war are readily recognized as historical records of great importance, and numerous weighty volumes have already been written based on them alone. But the ill-spelled, laboriously written letters from pioneers in the Ohio country to their New England relatives are just as really historical

records, and to certain students they are far more precious than the momentous documents of midsummer, 1914. We value the contemporaneous portraits of Washington and Jefferson and Franklin, and give them a prominent place in our museums and galleries; but if there had been a camp photographer at Valley Forge, I imagine that a few score examples of his art would aid us far more in visualizing the struggle for independence than do the canvases of Peale.

No human document is beneath the consideration of the historical profession, and human documents are as infinite in their variety as are human activities themselves. The collection and preservation of such documents is essentially a cooperative task and it is to the accomplishment of this task that historical societies may most usefully devote themselves.

In the United States and Canada there are nearly five hundred voluntary organizations bearing the name of Historical Society. The American nation, more perhaps than any other, is curious as to its history. Possibly this is because the American regards the history of his country, or at any rate of his state or locality, as a personal matter. Much of it has been made within the period covered by his own memory; he himself or his ancestors have had a part in making it; the beginnings of America are not so remote as to defy the imagination. At any rate, whatever the explanation, there are more Historical Societies in the United States than in any other country. They are devoted for the most part to the history of various territorial areas, but there are some that occupy themselves with other fields. Of such probably none have greater possibilities of usefulness than those which are concerned mainly with church or religious history. There are not many of these—the American Baptist Historical Society of Philadelphia, the New England Baptist Historical Society of Boston, the Presbyterian Historical Society of Philadelphia, and the Unitarian and Universalist Historical Societies, both naturally of Massachusetts, are the only societies devoted to the history of the non-Catholic denominations that find mention in a report made some years ago to the American Historical Association.

The Catholic Church is better represented, especially by the strong and active American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia, founded in 1884, by the younger Catholic Historical

Society of St. Paul, and by such other organizations as the United States Catholic Historical Society of New York, the Maine Catholic Historical Society, and others. Some of these societies have really notable collections of books and manuscripts. One of them has, for over twenty-five years, published with much credit to itself the quarterly *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society*; the St. Paul Society is engaged in putting out an annual collection of *Acta et Dicta*; while the United States Catholic Historical Society, which for five years (1887-1892) brought out the *Catholic Historical Magazine*, now publishes an annual volume of *Historical Records and Studies*. During the last two years there has appeared, from the Catholic University of America, the *Catholic Historical Review* in whose pages this article is printed, which has received most favorable notice from the historical profession in general and which promises to become the recognized organ of all American Catholic historical activity.

It will be seen, then, that the American Catholics have done much more for their history than have any of the Protestant denominations. But even all that has been accomplished is but little in comparison with the opportunities afforded by this field of history. Religious history has as yet by no means come into its own in America. Its delayed development is due in part to the tendency to draw a sharp dividing line between religious and other activities—a tendency which is emphasized by the absolute separation of church and state under our form of government. The church and religion have seemed to be things apart from the state, and the historical investigator has been too much inclined to leave them entirely to one side. This is perhaps strange when we consider the dominant part played by both in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Theocratic New England and the church-dominated colonies of France and Spain give to the religious history of the ante-revolutionary period an importance which has not been entirely overlooked, but which, nevertheless, has not received sufficient attention. But the religious aspects of our national history, as distinct from our colonial history, have been almost ignored.

Now as one of the causal elements in human conduct religion is, as it always has been, of supreme importance. Man is essentially religious by nature, whether he recognizes the fact or not.

In countless villages and towns nearly all social life centers about the church or churches, and especially is this true with regard to the Catholic Church. But not only is the Catholic Church an important social center, its schools and colleges make it also a center of educational activities; indeed, it takes part in all phases of the life of its communicants, who themselves constitute a very appreciable percentage of the total population of our country.

Has not the time come to recognize the importance of church and religious history; to gather together the materials upon which that history must be based; to impress upon clergy and laymen alike the necessity of cooperation in accomplishing the task fundamental to all historical investigation?

The organization of the Catholic Church lends itself admirably to this work. The problem is mainly one of method, and it is to that problem that this article chiefly devotes consideration.

In every Diocese of the Catholic Church in America there should be organized, as has been done in those of New York, Philadelphia, St. Paul, Portland, Me., and one or two others, a Diocesan Historical Society. It would naturally be under the patronage, if not the direct guidance, of the bishop. In composition it should resemble most American learned societies, a characteristic feature of which is that they are large semi-popular bodies open to all who desire to join but administered by those most interested in the objects to which they are devoted. The result is that, under the guidance of a relatively small number of experts, the resources and support contributed by the many are most usefully utilized. Such an organization is not undemocratic, provided, of course, that ultimate control rests in the general membership.

In a Diocesan Society such as I have suggested, it is natural to expect that the clergy, by reason of their training and interest, would be the guiding element, to which, however, should be added such laymen as are qualified by education, by vocation, or by taste. The society should be established by proper ecclesiastical authority so as to give it a definite and official status capable of being recognized in a formal way. Into details of organization, however, it is not needful to enter at present. They must be determined by circumstances which necessarily vary in different dioceses.

It is especially with the functions of such a society that I

wish to deal. The functions or activities of any historical society lie naturally along two lines—the collection of historical material and the dissemination of historical information. Concomitant with these activities is the arousing of a popular and intelligent interest in history.

It seems to be a generally accepted opinion among workers in the historical field that the function of first importance is that of collecting materials. Without collections of books, manuscripts, and other objects, the historian is helpless. They are to him what rocks and soils are to the geologist, or flora to the botanist. The Diocesan Historical Society should then devote itself first of all to the gathering of material.

To this end a suitable building should be acquired or a portion of a building set apart. The building need not be costly nor of pretentious architecture, but it must, and this is imperative, afford complete security from fire and other accidents to the collections which it is to house. We may well envy some of the European societies the charming and quaint medieval edifices which they occupy, edifices which are in themselves historical monuments of no little interest. In America we may have to be content with providing a secure resting place for our treasures, but we must not be content with less.

The collections themselves fall naturally into three divisions: Archives, Library, and Museum. Of these the Archives are the most important. They would include first of all the official records of the Diocese and of the parishes which compose it, so far as these records are not needed for constant use and purposes of reference in the offices or localities to which they belong. The Archives should also include the official correspondence of the Diocese; that is, the correspondence of the Bishop with the clergy, with the Archbishop and other ecclesiastical officials in America and elsewhere, and with Rome. The parish correspondence should also be included in the Archives; that is, the official correspondence of the clergy among themselves and with others. Provision for the centralization of such records and correspondence should be made by ecclesiastical legislation. The gathering together of this material does not necessarily mean that it is to be thrown open to all comers. The records and correspondence that I have mentioned constitute the official

Archives of the Diocese; the authorities of the Diocese have ample power to determine and control the use to which they may be put. No government allows free access to all of its archives, and it is hardly to be expected that semi-public organizations and institutions should do so.

Side by side with these original official archives, supplementing them, should be gathered copies, photographic or otherwise, of documents selected from the Vatican Archives in Rome, from those of the Congregation de Propaganda Fide, and from European Archives generally. In Paris the Bibliothèque Nationale and the Archives Nationales are especially rich in manuscript documents relating to American church history. The same is true of certain English, German, and Austrian archives, and especially of the archives of Spain. Some idea of the wealth of this sort of material may be obtained from the series of *Guides* that have been published or that are in course of preparation by the Carnegie Institution of Washington.

Probably the maintenance of European copyists would be too formidable an undertaking for any single Diocesan Society, but it might be accomplished through cooperation on the part of several societies, just as the Historical Societies of the Mississippi Valley have cooperated to prepare a catalogue of all documents in the French archives relating to that region.

In addition to the archives, both original and in copy, there should be collected miscellaneous manuscripts of every description. Such work as this has well-nigh endless possibilities. Probably in any parish there is hardly a family that has not some few letters, diaries, old account books, or similar material that could be secured for the society's collections. In immigrant families one would expect to find letters from the home-land; in families long established in America should be letters from sons and relatives who have moved away to newer parts of the country. Countless Catholic families have soldier or sailor sons, and their letters, especially in the aggregate, must be possessed of the greatest interest.

Another class of material, which is eagerly sought for by the economic historian and which may prove suggestive to the church historian, consists of the records of business houses. What a light it would throw upon the life of the middle ages if

we had access to any considerable quantity of the records of the shopkeepers and tradespeople of, say, Bologna. Yet the records of the tradespeople of today will be as eagerly sought for and utilized by the student of future centuries. Farm and plantation records constitute another class of economic material of which much use is made at the present time in reconstructing the life of the ante-bellum South. In the seaport towns along the Atlantic coast are many families who have preserved ship's papers, or long letters from skippers engaged in the whale fishery or in the China trade; others have fragmentary records of commercial houses throwing light upon foreign trade. The families of professional men, especially lawyers, not infrequently are found to possess whole barrels of miscellaneous papers from long forgotten law offices: wills, deeds, agreements, accounts, correspondence, and similar documents. Of intensely human interest, to employ a much abused expression, are the funeral notices, the mourning cards, and the announcements of weddings, births, or christenings that nearly every family has treasured up. Such documents may not seem important, but in the aggregate these constitute a valuable commentary on popular and social customs. A restaurant menu, a family cook book, with choice recipes written in by hand, a shopping list—all of these seem fairly commonplace and insignificant, but to the historian of two centuries hence they will not appear so. Programmes of theaters, of concerts, or of church "entertainments," the parish *Bulletins*, prospectuses of popular lecture courses, circus posters, announcements of excursions, hand bills of auctions, even the score cards sold at baseball games—all of these, in judicious selection, picture the community in its moments of recreation. The literature sent to voters before election, specimen ballots, voting lists, and similar material may often render the greatest service to the investigator. And so the list might be continued indefinitely, but it has probably been carried far enough to suggest the possibilities, in any community, of collecting material that illustrates with great wealth of detail all phases of the life of that community. When one considers the opportunity which the parish clergy have of entering into the homes of the people and of gathering such historical pabulum as has been described, one realizes what an incalculable service to the cause of history may be rendered by the Diocesan Society.

The Library of the society is of necessity more formal. Naturally it would contain such works of reference as it might be possible to secure, but especially should it devote itself to the collection of local publications. Town and county histories, biographies of former citizens and communicants, the published documents of municipalities and other political divisions—such books would form a substantial part of its collections. Other classes of materials that should be obtained are almanacs, catalogues of stores and manufacturers, text-books used in the schools, collections of popular songs, commercial prospectuses, and above all, although mentioned rather incongruously at this point, works of church and religious history. Newspapers and other periodical publications constitute an important category in the collections of any library, but in the Library of an historical society they are of an especial importance. While the Society may readily preserve the weekly newspapers of the small town and should endeavor to do so, it is clearly not possible, unless the Society has unusual resources both in money and in storage space, to preserve complete files of the great daily papers. These are the despair of the largest libraries in the country. An expedient to be recommended is the collection of newspaper clippings. In the course of a few years a collection of clippings from the larger newspapers relating to matters of church and religion would attain to very considerable proportions, and, if properly classified, would be of untold service to the cautious student. Other periodical publications, which it is especially desirable to preserve, are the religious and church papers, magazines, calendars, or bulletins, as well as the publications of missionary societies and of such other societies as have a close connection with the church. Few libraries have files of this material, which, however, is exceedingly valuable.

The Library should be so equipped as to constitute an ideal place of study, and it should be the aim of the society to make it such a center of work that students would be compelled to resort to it. There are many historical societies in the country that maintain a library of sorts which is open only to members and at some such hours as from 2 to 4 on Fridays. The Diocesan Society would doubtless follow a more liberal policy.

The Museum should be one of the society's chief attractions. Through it a strong and wide appeal may be made to the popular

imagination, and it should be utilized to the utmost as a means not only of arousing interest in matters historical, but also of adding to the Society's collections. No casual visitor ever drops into an archive depot to see what may be there, and few, without some special mission, frequent a library unless it be to see the mural paintings or the grand stairway, but no one, whether he be a tourist or merely a native, can resist the call of the museum. If the Museum, by reason of its collections and the manner of displaying them, can arouse even a transient interest in the past, who shall say that some good has not been done? It is only within recent years that we have come to appreciate the function of the historical museum. The great difficulty in all historical study is to visualize the past. Constantly we find ourselves thinking of it in terms of the present, or if we do not do that we allow our imagination to carry us far afield and we picture the men and women of former generations in a way that would doubtless surprise and possibly pain those worthies. The function of the historical museum is to aid in the correct visualization of the past. It enables us the better to know the people of a bygone age: how they looked, what they wore, the familiar objects with which they were surrounded, the utensils and implements that they were accustomed to handle, what they rode in when they went abroad, the objects they saw in shop windows, in short, all the commonplaces of their existence. It is only with some such aid that we can enter into their lives and, to a limited extent, see things with their eyes.

Almost every community can supply enough objects serving to illustrate its past and present life to stock a small museum. Of especial interest are the relics of the fatherland brought to America by the immigrants, which are too often despised by the second generation. An illustration that comes to mind is the Moravian museum at Winston-Salem in North Carolina. The illustration is the more apt because the community has from its foundation been essentially a religious community. Here in a small building are displayed dishes, costumes, musical instruments, head dress, furniture, and countless other objects, all of which have been things in actual use. The past life of the village seems to take on form and substance as one wanders up and down between the shelves and the show cases.

The arrangement of objects in a museum is an art in itself and much has of late been written about it. Into its details I need not go, even were I competent to do so. The guiding principle, however, is the association of ideas. Scattered objects which have no relation to each other mean but little and tend to confuse. If, however, an old room can be reconstructed with the furniture and bric-a-brac and rugs and dishes all in their appropriate places, how it seems to impart life and meaning to the exhibit!

Closely allied to the objects in the Museum, but constituting a distinct class by themselves, are pictures, especially photographs. The art of photography is of such recent origin that the student only of the most modern history can profit by it. Brady's photographs of the Civil War and the thousands of photographs of the present war illustrate the value of this sort of material. It is not necessary, however, to wait for a war to secure photographs of historical value. Photographs of obscure individuals, in sufficient number and properly arranged, may have important revelations for the student. Photographs of church buildings, chapels and rectories, of bridges, of wagons, of typical scenery, of streets, and of crowds, all have their uses. Indeed it is not extravagant to say that every society should, if possible, have a photographer whose duty it should be to reproduce in permanent pictorial form the scenes of every-day life as well as the extraordinary events of the community.

It is impossible in this connection to forbear mentioning the transcendent value of the cinematographic record. Suppose that we had such a record of Washington's first inauguration, of Lincoln at Gettysburg, or of the surrender at Appomattox! Many of the film producers make a practice of recording current events, and it would doubtless be possible for societies to secure such films as are of local interest after their commercial usefulness is past. Still better would it be if the society could have its own operator to make records of typical or extraordinary events, such as cornerstone layings, processions, etc., etc.

Another modern invention that provides the historian with illustrative material is the phonograph, and it would be a relatively simple and inexpensive matter for the society to collect phonographic records of local interest. The voice of the preacher,

the dialect of the immigrant, the calls of the street vender, the folk-songs of the children at play, are but illustrations of what may be preserved to the future in this way.

Thus far the function of the society as a collector of historical material has been under consideration. I propose now to consider, much more briefly and summarily, its function in the dissemination of information. Through popular lectures, through the organization of historical spectacles and pageants, around which quite a literature has of late grown up, and through the identification and marking of historic sites the society may accomplish much useful good. Most important of all, however, especially from the point of view of the serious student, is the publication of documents. If the society has been successful in the concentration of archives and the gathering of historical manuscripts, it will have on its hands much that should be made available for the widest general use. The Catholic communities of the Old World have realized their obligation in this respect and have given us, to cite but a single instance, the splendid series of the *Acta Sanctorum* which the Bollandists have been publishing since 1629.

Finally, the Society should have no little influence upon the historical instruction provided in the schools. Teachers should feel that the Archives and Library and Museum are valuable auxiliaries in their work. I am well aware that the quality and direction of history study in Catholic, Protestant, and non-sectarian schools are delicate matters for discussion. Each side charges the other with bias. The pity is that there should be sides. History is not an exact science, as that term is used, but its purpose is that of any other science—to determine the truth with regard to the phenomena which it investigates. Cannot the work of such a society as has been described aid in the better determination of the truth and in its more ready acceptance by all?

The foregoing is a rough sketch of possibilities, many of which are no doubt remote. Yet it is not unreasonable to hope that they may be realized if a start is made in the right direction with the ultimate ideals always in view. It seems even reasonable to look forward to the time when Diocesan Societies shall unite in a National Catholic Historical Association centering

about the Catholic University of America and carrying forward enterprises of the widest scope and of the utmost importance. The creation of an American Institute in Rome for the exploration of the church archives, the copying of documents in Europe and other parts of the world on a large scale, the publication of a great series of *Monumenta Ecclesiastica Statuum Foederatorum*, these and many other undertakings which are today but the visions of faith may yet become the realities of tomorrow.

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